

P.G. "I like it when my photographs are ambiguous, slightly incomprehensible, when they provoke questions. The images reflect the questions I ask myself." *

France is not only what we see in Paris Match. It is also here, 1981, in villages, towns and cities, where everything is old and reeks of tradition and where everything is new and ready for the year 2000.

There are contradictions in photos by photographers who hit the streets and extract images with a computer-rapid eye. These photos which pile up facts in the frame are often ambiguous. They are moments disassociated from a context, fragments of a continuum which deny real time. Yet photos are acknowledged as indices of time and place.

Different scenarios unfold when the photographs are then re-arranged into a new context: the relationship of the photographer to the street, city or country, his empathy or outrage; the relationship of the viewer to the photographs which add to our knowledge or contradict other sources of information. In the new fabricated context of similar

*Quoted from an interview with Pierre Gaudard, October 28, 1982.

and dissimilar photographs, the single image ceases to be isolated. It is coloured, influenced or altered by flanking photographs and it can recall distant ones.

This book is organized with elegant simplicity. Gaudard sequenced the images according to his understanding of his native land. No Marvin Israel graces these pages, but there is no remorse. Each "chapter" has an introduction, a French monument, object of veneration. They range from the tri-coloured flag masking a man (photographic homage to an itinerant photographer in America, one might assume), to stone statues commemorating men who fought the many French wars. French monuments are cultural symbols; they are central to every square, magnanimously glorifying French genius and heroic effort. Memento mori.

The first "chapter" recalls historical and contemporary icons: statues and memorials to the heroes from the past, rubber masks of political figures in the present and the personal icon, photography. There is a reference to Atget, turn of the century French photographer-at-large, to the amateur pumping through stereo views, to the photographer facing a line-up of firemen and their sweetheart, a rose-laden female.

Sometimes, the photos on facing pages are opposites: the city in the country, the country in the city, gendarmes generously lending a hand

at a party, goats in the trunk of a car. These contrasts are also complimented by structural similarities between facing images. Two bulls enter the frame from either side and border a tree in the centre, a third, ear and eye barely visible behind on the right. In the background two men flank the tree in front of a flagstone, tin-roofed café. On the opposite page, elegant waiters in white coats in front of a classy restaurant, two on one side, one on the other, are separated by a parisian street sign backed by eighteenth century architecture. Easily, verbal description belies similarity, but it compromises the emotional effect. A chain reaction is set up by contrasts, which point to absurd idiosyncracies of contemporary life and deny rational explanation. How ingenious lunch on the roof of an ugly modern home. How humble four men gathered around a table, each with a glass of wine, another staring straight into the camera. These photographs are not artifice.

Chapters wander. They start with a scenario which migrates into another and picks up errant photos along the way. Contrasting female roles, a decorated military type and a prostitute are introduced then fade into the background, ^{They are} barely picked up again by flying majorettes facing tottering veterans and finally assume the forefront with an elderly woman advancing in the frame, facing a fur-wrapped woman stepping out of a Cardin shop. Themes float in and out of circulation. Attention focusés and shifts. Frankness is replaced by frivolity, isolation by warm companionship.

Beyond all analysis, Pierre Gaudard's photographs are concerned with humanity. It is comforting to recognize someone who bothers about people, someone who pictures his parents next to young lovers making out on the grass, amidst a crowd or in a parking lot. It is true that there are photos about loneliness and separation, political figures and solidarity, idiosyncratic actions and individualism. All add confusion and clarity. A photographer with peripheral vision, Gaudard's attitude is never one of aggression, but one of quiet distinction, pointing toward contradiction, change and difference. The last image refocuses the scene; an individual faces an empty set with trees and unoccupied chairs. The curtain has not descended.